

U.S. MILITARY HELPS BUILD “WEST POINT” STYLE ACADEMY IN IRAQ

From Iraqi Farms to the Academy: Shia, Sunnis and Kurds Train Together

(Zahko, Iraq) – Throughout history, American farms have sent their sons and daughters to serve in the military, in times of peace, and in times of war.

With agriculture serving as the single largest employment sector in Iraq it comes as no surprise that Iraq's new military is filling up with farm kids, too.

The Zahko Military Academy is nestled in the picturesque hills of northwestern Iraq. The front gates of the sprawling campus are located just a few miles from the Turkish border.

Zahko is Iraq's version of West Point. The academy enrolls young men and women and graduates them as competent, highly



trained officers. The academy is one of the few places in Iraq where Kurds and Arabs are purposely integrated.

“On the first day of training, our cadets are told that Zahko does not train Shia, Sunnis, Assyrians, Kurds or Arabs. We train Iraqis. And we graduate Iraqi military officers,” says Major General Shihid Abdul Rahman, commandant at Zahko.



The grounds in Zahko were originally used as a training camp for the Kurdish Peshmerga military forces. After the coalition invasion, the complex was re-chartered as an Iraqi military academy.

U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Ed Carter is the senior American advisor to Zahko and part of a very small unit of U.S. soldiers working at the academy.

“At the end of January 2006, the U.S. government put in \$8.2 million to build, enhance and renovate the academy. Before the



investment, the capacity was about 200 students. Today, we have 709 cadets enrolled,” says Carter.

The cadets spend their days marching on the drill pad, running through the obstacle courses, and attending a full curriculum of classes.

Two buildings house “the sand pits.” Bleachers surround three sides of the room and cascade down over the intricate sand pit in the center of the floor. Color coded lights, city schematics, roads, bridges and rivers decorate the fictitious landscape in front of them. Their instructor leads them through a series of scenarios all aimed at helping them learn situational awareness.



Some of the cadets were aspiring career officers. Many are the sons of farmers just looking for an opportunity to serve their country. But most importantly, at Zahko, they are all simply Iraqis.

Photos and story by Paul McKellips, U.S. Department of State, Public Affairs GO Team, on assignment in Iraq.